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Heidegger and the Earth: Essays in Environmental Philosophy

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Recommended Citation

McWhorter, Ladelle, ed. *Heidegger and the Earth*. Northeast Missouri State University: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1992.

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Heidegger and the EARTH

Essays in Environmental
Philosophy

Edited by
Ladelle McWhorter

THE THOMAS JEFFERSON UNIVERSITY PRESS
at Northeast Missouri State University
1992

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Editor's Introduction

PARADOX IS THE TITILLATING OTHER OF ALL LOGICS rooted in the law of non-contradiction. It is Other because it is unassimilable; it is titillating because it is transgressive. Most of us enjoy an occasional encounter with paradox the way we enjoy a good joke – but rarely do we take paradoxes seriously. Our enjoyment, in fact, depends upon our thinking's maintaining itself within the logic of non-contradiction and viewing the paradoxical from that perspective rather than our immersing ourselves in the paradoxical on its own terms. However, when we think with Heidegger, especially when that thinking concerns itself with what we might loosely refer to as ecology, we find ourselves called upon to think with and within the paradoxical – or, at least, what appears paradoxical from the perspective of the logic of non-contradiction.

When we attempt to think ecologically and within Heidegger's discourse (or perhaps better: when we attempt to think Heideggerly within ecological concerns), the paradoxical unfolds at the site of the question of human action. Thinking ecologically – that is, thinking the earth in our time – means thinking death; it means thinking catastrophe; it means thinking the possibility of utter annihilation not just for human being but for all that lives on this planet and for the living planet itself. Thinking the earth in our time means thinking what presents itself as that which must not be allowed to go on, as that which must be controlled, as that which must be stopped. Such thinking seems to call for immediate action. There is no time to lose. We must work for change, seek solutions, curb appetites, reduce expectations, find cures *now*, before the problems become greater than anyone's ability to solve them – if they have not already done so. However, in the midst of this urgency, thinking ecologically, thinking Heideggerly, means rethinking the very notion of human action. It means placing in question our typical Western managerial approach to problems, our propensity for technological intervention, our belief in human cognitive power, our commitment to a metaphysics that places active human being over against passive nature. For it is the thoughtless deployment of these approaches and notions that has brought us to the point of ecological catastrophe in the first place. Thinking with Heidegger, thinking Heideggerly and ecologically, means, paradoxically, acting to place in question the acting subject, willing a displacing of our will to action; it means calling ourselves as selves to rethink our very selves, insofar as selfhood in the West is constituted as agent, as actor, as controlling ego, as knowing consciousness. Heidegger's work calls us not to rush in with quick solutions,

not to act decisively to put an end to deliberation, but rather to think, to tarry with thinking unfolding itself, to release ourselves to thinking without provision or predetermined aim.

The thinkers whose work makes up this book have felt called to think as Heidegger attempted to think. The essays presented here are responses to that call; they are attempts to take seriously what presents itself to us first of all as paradox; they are attempts to allow thinking to immerse itself in itself at the site of the very difficult question of how thinking might release itself to think the earth.

Thus, this volume unfolds itself at the edge of paradox. It comprises discussions of how we as active agents might come to hold ourselves resolutely open for the occurring of non-technological, non-managerial, non-agential thought, of how it might come about that speaking, thinking, and living might occur differently, of how we might begin now to undergo the loss of our delusion of impending omnipotence and perhaps escape that delusion's nihilistic results. The conversants are not environmental experts armed with information about particular crises or the consequences of particular techniques. They are philosophers struggling to open thinking toward paths that will affirm, rather than destroy the earth.

The first essay, "Guilt as Management Technology: A Call to Heideggerian Reflection," gives an overview of Heidegger's thinking on technology and discusses Heidegger's call for reflection as opposed to instrumental or calculative thinking about the earth. It carefully distinguishes reflection, in Heidegger's sense, from moral stock-taking or ethical judgment. In fact, it suggests that moral discourse and practice are themselves forms of technology, sets of techniques for maintaining control over self and other. As such, morality shows itself as a danger, as part of the technological, calculative, managerial thinking that currently endangers the earth itself. The essay closes with a kind of warning. If it is the case that morality is part of technological discourse and practice rather than a separable discourse whose purpose is critique, then moral condemnation and moral guilt are reinstantiations of the calculative. Thus, our tendency to feel guilty about our treatment of the earth is not a change of heart but is rather a perpetuation of human domination.

In "Heidegger and Ecology," Hanspeter Padrutt describes his own coming to see connections between Heidegger's thought and ecological thinking. He examines several of Heidegger's most fundamental notions, from "coming-forth holding-in-reserve" ("*aus einer zuvorkommenden zurückhaltung her*") to "*Gestell*," in their relation to ecology. He then examines current ecological thinking from a Heideggerian perspective, revealing some of the ways in which ecological thinking undercuts itself or falls back into a language of mastery or control, a language in which ecology's own most significant insights are in danger of being lost. Finally,

he addresses a number of possible criticisms of Heidegger's ecological thinking.

In his essay "The Path of a Thinking, Poetizing Building: The Strange Uncanniness of Human Being on Earth," Steven Davis examines in great detail Heidegger's analysis of Sophocles' "Ode on Human Being" from *Antigone*, giving particular attention to the notion that human being is not-at-home on earth. With great care Davis sets out the tensions Heidegger sees in the being of human being. Then he uses the elaboration of those tensions to situate the question of whether it is possible for human being to be itself in its uncanniness without also being violent.

In "Earth-Thinking and Transformation," Kenneth Maly shows us ways in which Heideggerian reflection upon the fact of our being as earth-dwellers can be transformative of our thinking at its very core and therefore transformative of our world. Maly believes that our culture's insistence upon a divorce between rationality and other ways of thinking and knowing has resulted in an impoverishment of our being and a destructive distancing from the earth that gives rise to, shelters, and sustains us. When we take ourselves and the earth as fixed entities to be comprehended by rational observation and theoretical constructs we lose sight of earth and being-human as process, as forever unfixed, as changing, growing, outgrowing, as living and therefore dying. It is only when we begin to think human being and earth as unfixed, as always undergoing transformation in a living unfolding of our/its being that a new, less destructive understanding of humanity-in/on-earth can come into being. And such understanding, Maly would argue, is absolutely necessary if we are to avoid destroying the earth.

Given, then, that Maly's claim is that we need to move underneath traditional Western modes of thought – modes of thought that force us to understand beings as static and unchangeable objects rather than as dynamic processes emerging and unfolding through time – it would be inappropriate for his essay to adhere to the norms of Western scholarship. Maly is true to his work. He presents us not with a carefully argued position but rather with a movement of thinking. The essay begins fully within Western rationality and moves in a four-stage process toward a different kind of thinking, one that he calls "earth-root-thinking," a thinking that re-images the earth, because, as he says, our images of the earth make us who and what we are. To stay with Maly through his essay is to attempt to move into this other thinking that he explores and advocates.

Gail Stenstad's essay, "Singing the Earth," takes us further along two of the paths that Maly's thinking indicates: earth as dark (the self-concealing that is both sheltering and frightening) and our longing to be with the earth. She suggests that it is our be-longing to the earth that is at stake. If, when we fear the dark, our desire or longing moves away from what is earthy, we live disconnected from the earth, with disastrous consequences.

However, if we allow ourselves to be moved by and with the revealing and concealing of earth and earthy things, our longing is also our be-longing. This be-longing will play itself out in, as Heidegger's thinking hints, our language (not just words but also: song, dance, art, buildings, ritual) and our ways of dwelling.

The volume ends with Thomas Davis' essay, "Meeting Place," which begins with the question of whether one might "be invited to neighbor the earth," to come to belong with the earth as companion. In order to open this question more fully, Davis draws us through a meditation on two texts, Wendell Berry's story of his encounter with a hawk in *Home Economics* and Heidegger's memory of the silent dialogue between an old oak and a country path in *Der Feldweg*. Through the course of his meditation, Davis brings us to an awareness of our mortal being as an essential openness to the unfamiliar, as the very possibility of being "next-to," or neighboring. And he brings us to a new sense of the earth as the unfamiliar, the unknowable, even as death is unknowable. This is an essay about difference, boundaries, and respectful acknowledgment of otherness; but more than that, it is an essay about the belonging-together, the "companioning," that is only possible in the acknowledgement of essential difference. Davis' essay stands in opposition to technological thinking that always and everywhere encounters nothing but man, nothing but itself. "Meeting Place" speaks difference and the awe that is possible only within the opening wherein difference is allowed to occur.

Though each essayist presents his or her thinking as it has arisen out of the texts of Martin Heidegger, as this brief overview surely makes clear, the thoughts a reader will encounter here are diverse and perhaps at points conflicting. However, the essayists' differences in many cases actually grow out of a common sense, namely, a sense of urgency born of the knowledge that for many regions of the earth and for many of the beings within them time is running out. The book itself, including its conflicting assertions, is the embodiment of a kind of anxiety and a kind of care. This book is a beginning, an opening, an attempt, and, we hope, in the best Nietzschean sense of the word, a temptation for further thought.

We owe thanks to the editors of *Heidegger Studies* for graciously allowing us the translation rights for Hanspeter Padrutt's essay, "Heidegger and Ecology," originally published as "Heideggers Denken und die Ökologie" in *Heidegger Studies*, Vol. VI (1990): 43-66. We also owe special thanks to Northeast Missouri State University for partial funding of the 1989 conference "Heidegger and the Earth," at which versions of several of these papers were first presented. In particular, we thank the Office of the Vice President of Academic Affairs, the Divisions of Science and Social Science, and Missouri South and Ryle South Residential Colleges. For her excellent work in assisting in the coordination of the conference, we owe very special

thanks to Ms. Roberta Martin, NMSU Undergraduate Research Fellow in Philosophy, 1989.

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Kirksville, Missouri
June 1991